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ABSTRACT

The paper considers myths about the educability of children from varying ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds, and addresses the special needs of gifted Black adolescents. Hereditary, environmental, and developmental views toward educability are reviewed, and the developmental position is further examined as it relates to minority children. Identification of gifted Blacks is seen to be complicated because many Black youths are underachievers and may have manifested their giftedness in ways uncharacteristic of mainstream culture's gifted. Manifestations of gifted characteristics in gifted Black children are correlated with characteristics from the literature (e.g., keen observation, breadth of information, verbal proficiency) in areas of intellectual strengths, creative strengths, and style. (CI)

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The Gifted Black Adolescent:
Focus Upon the Creative Positives

Broadening concepts of giftedness have become a major concern in the education profession in the 70's. Traditional methods of assessment, which too often assume generic deficits in disadvantaged or culturally different populations, have not been predictive of real-life abilities to cope with mainstream society. Education has discriminated against children with needs different from the norm. The historical emphasis upon capacity for learning has been to perceive school learning as primarily dependent upon the presumed ability of the student, rather than upon the quality of the learning environment. However, there appears to be a growing recognition that school failure and student underachievement are socially determined. Even so, as John and Leacock note (1979, p.77) such recognition has not prevented new interpretations of these failures which blame the victims and, often, co-exist with arguments about innate or class deficiencies. The gifted, or potentially gifted Black adolescent is probably the most frequent casualty of the persisting myths about the differential educability of children from varying ethnic, racial, and socio-economic backgrounds. It is the central position of this paper that educability is a universal human characteristic and that special gifts and talents are distributed proportionately in all ethnic, racial, and class groups.

A review by Hunt (1961) of a number of cross-cultural studies and studies of children reared in orphanages and day care centers led him to the conclusion that estimates of hereditability say essentially nothing about educability. Heredity certainly influences competence, but these findings imply that most humans are born with the potential to achieve all of the various competencies required for productive participation in any culture in the world (Hunt, 1979, p.46). The premise that human nature is not the barrier to educational and cultural development--that many have alleged--highlights the issue of the relationship between potential and performance.

There are three relative emphases which have been advanced to explain this relationship: (1) hereditary, (2) environmental, and (3) developmental. These positions assign relatively different weights to genetic and environmental influences, but all acknowledge that more or less interactive effects exist. The particular position to which educators and other decision makers subscribe will dictate crucial decisions concerning assessment and educational goals and techniques. It will determine, for example, who will be identified as gifted or talented.

The hereditarian position suggests that intelligence is stable and relatively unsusceptible to modification by deliberate intervention. Intelligence is, supposedly, genetically determined (Jensen, 1973; Herrnstein, 1971). It is well to remember, however, that intelligence, as viewed by the hereditarians, is what is measured by an IQ

test. There are several assumptions which underlie their faith in these instruments. Two of them will be highlighted here: (1) that the IQ test measures an intelligence which is a unitary mental ability; and (2) that the IQ test measures an innate ability which is affected only to a small degree by experience. The first assumption has been challenged by Guilford's work following an earlier lead of Thurstone. The validity of the unitary model of intelligence is brought into question by positing a multivariable model of intelligence. There are 120 projected cells or abilities in this model, 98 of which have been investigated by factor analysis and have known abilities (Guilford, 1979, p. 25). IQ, while a single score, probably represents many intellectual operations interacting with affective factors such as motivation (Jones, 1949; Hunt, 1961). The second assumption is challenged by many researchers, but probably the greatest challenge grows out of the work of Piaget who emphasizes that all human organisms adapt to the environment and in the process of that interaction integrate psychological structures into coherent systems (Piaget, 1952). This position will be further explored later. Ginsburg suggests that is not proper to ask how heredity and environment have contributed to intelligence, but rather, how heredity and environment have contributed to the particular skills which the IQ test measures (Ginsburg, 1972).

The environmental position, while not precluding genetic limitations, suggests that capacity may change in

response to environmental stimulation. Performance is descriptive of current competence but does not describe potential. Coleman found relatively low correlations between quality of schooling and achievement--except in the case of poor and minority children. Gordon suggests that this and other studies indicate that, given the same degree of intrinsic resources for learning or development, the quality of environmental support may become a deciding element (1972, p.59). Thus, when support for academic learning is not a part of the natural environment, the modest support of schools evidently does make a difference. Bloom (1976, p.200) builds his theory of mastery learning upon the belief that most members of the society are capable of acquiring each type of competence needed and that personal qualities and environmental factors determine which individuals will finally acquire them. Of course, Skinner, would argue that the learning environment is the only variable susceptible to systematic manipulation (Skinner, 1968).

The developmental position follows Piagetian theory and contends that all children develop in interaction with the environment and that the development follows invariant stages. All human organisms adapt to their environments; the manner of adaptation depending upon the characteristics of the environments, the unique experiences of the individual, and other factors. Piaget stresses that the child seeks contact with the environment, initiates ways of coping with it, and even tries to 'make things happen'.

When an event occurs, the individual attempts to assimilate it into his/her present cognitive/affective structures. The result of the pressure exerted by environment to assimilate is known as accomodation. In short says Piaget (1963, p.6), intellectual adaptation consists of an equilibrium between assimilation and accomodation and represents the external aspect of intelligence. The internal aspect of intelligence is organization, a development and coordination of structures, and a system of interconnected meanings. The organism adapts itself by materially constructing new forms to fit into those of the Universe, whereas intelligence extends this creation by building mental structures which can be applied to those of the environment (Piaget, 1963, p.4).

Further Exploration of the Developmental Position
as it Relates to Minority Children

The stance which schools take toward minority children, the opportunities which are afforded them, and the structure of their learning environments vary with the position espoused regarding the nature/nuture question. The developmental position emphasizes the need to understand the characteristics and performance of the learner as well as the characteristics of the environment. There are two major modalities which are seen to govern the interaction between child and environment, i.e., direct exposure to stimuli which when assimilated and accomodated lead to enhancement of cognitive structures and intervention by an adult or

other person to mediate experience. Growth, according to the developmentalists requires opportunities for experiences that elicit progressive series of accommodative efforts which build into high level competence (Hunt, 1979, p. 49).

It is becoming evident that children accomplish great intellectual feats during the years when they experience minimal or no formal education, regardless of socio-economic status (John & Leacock, 1979; Carew, Chan, and Halfar, 1976). The cultural and environmental context of that learning determines the context and dominant model of conceptualization of the children's intellectual processes. For example, rural children often compare poorly to other groups in IQ and achievement. However, at least one study has found that children from extremely isolated farms excelled over those in rural settlements or urban centers (Hollas, 1970). Evidently the necessity to be largely self-sufficient and to address the operational problems posed by the farm led to acceleration of cognitive development.

Longitudinal data on Israeli children of Moroccan and European parentage show differences during infancy which clearly favor the Moroccan group (Smilansky, Shephatia, & Freukel, 1976). Moroccan families appear to be better adapted to fostering infant development--up to a certain age level; in about the second year, the European children begin to show marked gain. The early precocity of children raised in more 'traditional' family situations is supported by a number of studies summarized by Werner (1972).

The fact that such early acceleration and later decline of development of "traditionally reared" children, appears with groups that are very different as to race and ethnicity, country and continent of origin--makes an exclusively genetic explanation unlikely (Werner, 1972). It does appear likely that the developmental turning point is related to the child's push for independence, the onset of free locomotion, and the acquisition of language, all of which demand radical changes in the parent-child relationship. Smilansky and others interpret the evidence to suggest the possibility that there is some discontinuity in the needs of the child, and accordingly in what can be regarded as "beneficial" for his development (1976, p.19).

Israel has had to integrate large numbers of children and adolescents from varying cultural and environmental backgrounds. These children show roughly the learning and performance deficiencies characteristic of groups labeled culturally disadvantaged, culturally deprived, and/or culturally different in our society. Major social programs have been established in order to reduce the gap between different ethnic groups. However, the gap still exists and is considered to be one of the central problems of Israel's future (Feuerstein, 1971; Smilansky et al, 1976). Two major assumptions are implicit or are stated in much of the literature describing the Israeli efforts. The first of these assumptions is that any given level of development is the result of a complex interaction of cultural-

social and genetic factors but that the dynamic operational factors have not yet been isolated. The second assumption is that it is necessary to attempt to modify the structure and level of intellectual functioning of members of those groups who are perceived by Westernized Israelis as deficient in order to enhance the capacity of these persons to respond to the requirements of a modern technological society.

Moshe Smilansky notes that the term "tenuei tipuach" (in need of fostering) is a positive expression which is used in Israel to indicate that members of inferior groups, from the standpoint of the expectations of the educational system, can improve their state with appropriate assistance in fostering their intellectual and social skills (1979 p.98)

The value-oriented assumptions about the persons who come under the rubric of "tenuei tipuach" are: first, they are members of a group in a state of deficit relative to the dominant values and needs of the society in which they live; second, cognitive modifiability, i.e. a structural modification in the functioning of the individual reflecting change in the expected course of his/her development (Feuerstein, Krasilowsky & Rand), is a possible and appropriate goal which will make for better life adjustments.

The nature of the cognitive defects is considered peripheral rather than central, reflecting inadequate working habits, insufficiency of learning sets, and inadequate attitudes rather than incapacity to elaborate data internally (Feuerstein & Rand, p.8). These deficient functions are considered to be

highly modifiable and accessible to a process of re-development even at adolescence. They are not considered to reflect a peculiarity of a given racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic group (p.10). Feuerstein believes that many persons, including many labeled as mental retardants, have far more capacity for reasoning and learning than is thought. His position is that these persons provide a testing-technology problem because present psychometric devices are not sensitive to the true cognitive capacities of the undeveloped thinker (Narrol & Dacher, 1975). There is abundant evidence to suggest that current tests have low predictive value/validity for estimating cognitive potential in persons whose previous experience and environment have lacked the stimulation appropriate for certain types of cognitive development and conceptual modeling (Feuerstein, 1971; Hunt, 1979; Gordon, 1979; Ginsberg, 1972).

There have been many attempts to describe and evaluate the research and theory which have led to conclusions concerning the intellectual capacity of poor and/or culturally different children. The most prevalent view of the source of ethnic and social class differences in intellectual performance may be summed up under the label of "the deficit hypotheses" (Cole & Bruner, 1971). A primary result of these perceived deficits was seen to express itself in lowered test scores and academic performance when such children were compared to their more advantaged peers. Theories of intervention that grew from this view included early stimulation (Klaus & Gray, 1968; Deutsch, 1967) and cognitive modifiability

(Feuerstein, 1971; Smilansky, 1979). Reviews of another body of data and knowledge, however, cast doubts on the conclusion that a deficit exists in minority group children, and even raised doubts as to whether any nonsuperficial differences exist among different cultural groups (Cole & Bruner, 1971; Ginsburg, 1972). Anthropologists such as Kroeber (1948) assume that different conclusions about the world are the result of different, but equally logical, ways of organizing the world of experience. Linguists such as Chomsky caution that people cannot be assumed to have a cognitive capacity less than required for the complex activity of language (1966). Usual testing procedures focus upon existing and manifest behavior patterns rather than process and latent potential. Certainly the performance produced in a testing situation represent a complex interaction of the content and environment of the experiment, often leading to unfounded conclusions about cognitive capacity (Labov, 1970). Kagan and Kogan conclude that differences in quality of testing behaviors and other types of public performances may be misleading indices of competence (1970). It becomes clear, therefore, that: (1) the distinction between performance and potential must be further clarified; (2) potential--or at least modifiability (Feuerstein, 1971)--must be measured by the capacity of the individual to use a new learning experience to solve new problems or by some other appropriate test; and (3) some individuals may not have developed the repertoire of performances demanded by particular cultural settings because

those demands are inconsistent with his/her past cultural experience.

There is ample evidence to support the view that the intellect of poor and/or minority children is not fundamentally different. It follows from Piaget's model that cognitive universals and social class differences are the inevitable result of biological adaptation to the environment. It inevitably follows, also, that poor and/or minority children must be different. They live in unique environments, often characterized by oppression and deprivation, which present problems to be solved which cannot even be imagined by affluent and/or majority children. That reasonable adjustments are created to meet these problems should lead us to ask as Ginsberg suggests (1972) "not why are poor children deficient, but why do they develop as well as they do". In the present social context of the United States, as Cole and Bruner note (1971), the great power of the middle class has rendered differences into deficits because middle-class behavior is the yardstick of success.

The Special Case of the Gifted Black

Adolescent Learner

Previous sections of this paper have suggested the profound changes in concepts of intelligence and functioning of the human mind which have been witnessed in the last 25 years. One of these changes has been a broadened concept of giftedness.

Early definitions of giftedness, academic talent or

genius were pegged to IQ scores as valid measures of intelligence highlighting. A core issue in the definition of giftedness, is what is intelligence and how can it be measured. The single most important instrument for measuring IQ has been the Stanford-Binet intelligence test. Terman took Binet's work and produced an individual test which was highly reliable when used on population similar to the one on which it was normed. The standardized group intelligence tests which were subsequently developed and standardized on similar populations were convenient, easily scored, and easily used with large groups. The makers and users of these tests, however, appeared not to share Binet's perception of the complexity of the human mind, including affective dimensions and cognitive abilities and processes (Wolf, 1973)*

Serious problems have arisen in the use of instruments validated on one population to evaluate a dissimilar population. The group test was renormed in 1937 and again in 1972. The 1972 sample included, for the first time, ethnic minorities and produced dramatic shifts in IQ's for pre-schoolers and moderate gains for adolescents (Thorndike, 1975). The largest improvement took place in the performance of pre-schoolers on non-verbal, pictorial, perceptual, and memory items rather than on items requiring a good deal

semantic content (Thorndike, 1975, p.5). The high average values were especially impressive since the sample did

*Wolf quotes Binet as follows: "Comprehension, inventiveness, direction, and criterium; intelligence is contained in these four words". p. 204

include ethnic minorities.

If we assume that intelligence is proportionately distributed among all ethnic groups and at all socio-economic levels, it is important to select appropriate criteria for identifying and selecting gifted children regardless of environment and heredity. During the last few years aspects of giftedness other than intelligence as measured by IQ tests have received considerable attentions due to the work of Guilford. Bruch suggests identification of the "disadvantaged gifted" through specification of cultural strengths according to the structure of intellect model of Guilford (1971). Specific multiple criteria must be used for the identification of disadvantaged or culturally different children. A number of persons are currently refining or developing possible means of identification (N/S LTI, 1975, pp. 39-41). Promising approaches are to be found in the Baldwin Matrix (Baldwin, 1978) or adaptations of it such as that being used by the Secondary School Experiential Learning Community (SSELC) project of Virginia State University and Richmond Public Schools (Dabney, 1979).

The identification of gifted Black adolescents is a special problem in that many Black youth are underachievers and have had their perceptions of themselves as failures confirmed. Also, giftedness in Blacks is frequently manifested in ways which are not characteristic of gifted in the mainstream culture. These problems may be manifested in disruptive or impulsive behavior and boredom and may be

intensified by the frustrations of a school environment which does not provide the necessary setting for social and emotional self-clarification, confidence, and growth. The latter may be particularly important in light of the conclusions of Epstein that in approximately 85 percent of all youngsters, the brain ceases to grow between the ages of 12 and 14 (1977). There appear to be brain growth spurts which may coincide with the main stages of Piaget's development periods. In light of this finding it is recommended by Epstein that middle school programs focus upon refinement of existing cognitive skills of learning rather than forcing these learners into frustrating experiences of trying to acquire new cognitive skills when absence of brain growth cannot sustain such activity. Emphasis on affective and psychomotor aspects of learning should receive increased attention during this period.

It should be noted here that accurate information about gifted Black children is sparse; accurate information about the qualities of gifted Black adolescents, especially their strengths, is particularly sparse. However, attention is given here to the strengths of gifted Black adolescents as they are presently described. These will be divided into three categories: (1) intellectual strengths, (2) creative strengths, (3) style.

Major sources of information about intellectual strengths come from the work of Guilford, Meeker, and Bruch with structure of Intellect tests. Gay summarized characteristics of

giftedness of Black children as they emerge in the literature (Fall, 1978, p. 354).

Comparative Characteristics of Giftedness

<u>Concepts from the Literature</u>	<u>Manifestations of Gifted Characteristics in Gifted Black Children</u>
1. Keen observation	Picks up more quickly on racist attitudes and practices; may feel alienated by school at an early age;
2. Interest and ability in perceiving relationships	Seeks structure and organization in required tasks; may be slow to motivate in some abstract activities;
3. Verbal proficiency, large vocabulary, facility of expression	Many Black children have large vocabularies inappropriate for school settings; thinking in Black English may hinder the facility of expression in standard English;
4. Breadth of information	Difficult to determine many areas of experiential knowledge for Black children;
5. Questioning, curious, skeptical	Though some ask too many "wrong" questions some may have been conditioned to suppress questioning behavior;
6. Critical evaluative possessing good judgment	Explores (in perception of relationship) better or wiser choices; reads behavioral implications
8. Power of concentration, long attention span	May find some have extremely strong concentration due to persistent noise

Concepts from the
Literature

Manifestations of Gifted Charac-
teristics in Gifted Black Children

- | | |
|--|--|
| 8. Independence | in environment; may also express dis-
pleasure at having to stop an activity;
Need for less supervision especially
in Black gifted; |
| 9. Diversity of interests
and abilities | Frequently has artistic, musical, creative
writing, psychomotor or leadership talent
in addition to global intellectual
ability, may neglect school work due to
other interests; |
| 10. Academic facility
and strength | Good at basic school tasks, may not
have expected achievement due to inferior
schooling. |

Brusch notes that cognitions available to culturally different children are not measured on traditional tests (1971). For example, in her research SOI performance of children indicated that logical reasoning required in practical problems solving situations was an expected strength. She lists the following summary of strengths (p.8.).

1. Visual and auditory figural content-space relations, musical forms, etc.
2. Memory operations
3. Convergent production, especially practical problem-solving
4. Units products--all except verbal(semantic)
5. Classes products--units classification

6. Systems products--understanding of the whole, the total system

More specifiaally, strengths of Black children according to Bruch (1971) and Meeker(1969) are to be found in:

Art and Music

Spontaneous recall

Complex (3 and 4 steps) problem solving in daily activities

Awareness of details in description, fluency of ideas

Spontaneous categorizations

Visual synthesis in complex drawings, multiple musical or kinaesthetic (dance or atheletics) perceptions or the system

The research of Torrance on creativity indicates that creativity is one of the big strengths of minority and disadvantaged groups. Tests of creativity appear to have practically no racial, ethnic, and/or socio-economic bias (1978). This special talent may put the Black adolescent in double jeopardy since the highly creative child may suffer cruelly at the hands of society. This may be doubly true of a child who is a member of a minority group. It has been shown that highly divergent or creative adolescents achieved as well as their highly intelligent peers, though different by as much as 23 IQ points (Getzels and Jackson, 1962). Torrance found that if one used intelligence tests alone to identify the upper 20 percent of a population as gifted, one would miss 70 percent of those who would be identified in the upper 20 percent by a test of creative thinking (1970).

These findings lead Torrance to list what he calls the Creative Positives of disadvantaged children (1970):

- Ability to express feelings, to improvise
- Articulate in role playing
- Possess artistic, musical, dramatic ability
- Expressive speech
- Fluency and flexibility in non-verbal media
- Skills in group learning and problem solving
- Responsive to the concrete and kinesthetic
- Expressive body language
- Originality in brain storming
- Problem-centered
- Emotionally responsive
- Quick warm-up, i.e., quick flow of ideas
- Humor

Perusal of this list indicates qualities of social leadership and outstanding qualities of human understanding.

If one attends to the description of intellectual and creative strengths, the description of the style of Black students by Hilliard represents a logical outgrowth (1976). It should be remembered, however, that there is much variety within the group, as well as between groups. Hilliard suggests that Black students:

- Prefer to respond to and with "gestalts" rather than to or with atomistic things. Enough particulars are tolerated to get a general sense of things. Approximations are preferred to fine-tuned accuracy.

Prefer inferential reasoning to deductive or inductive reasoning.

Prefer a focus on people

Have a keen sense of justice and quickness to analyze and perceive injustice

These style factors are based primarily on observation and need to be subjected to additional testing. Certainly, it makes sense to assume that such factors may work against the interest of Black children in an assessment situation (Witty, Fall 1978, p. 348). In addition, Hilliard (1976) reviewed assessment studies which appeared to him to reflect the interweaving of politics and assessment. He considered that applying assessment skills in a cross-cultural situation is complex and difficult, that any assessor or instrument reflects an ethnocentric psycho-cultural dynamic, and that the pattern of psycho-cultural dynamics was a major variable in the assessment process (p.28).

Summary

It is possible that in the future we will move toward an operational definition of giftedness which is based on potential for creativity. This will include the top 10 or 11 percent of the population and an IQ of about 120. Such a definition would be consonant with present understanding of the nature of man and human development, and would demonstrate acceptance of beliefs more in harmony with present knowledge. Identification must become culturally specific,

but should also include coping skills. The evidence suggests that Black adolescents are highly divergent and that they should achieve as well as highly convergent, high IQ children. Especially is this true in light of the expected memory factors. The weakness in handling semantic units must receive special attention as must the problem of providing appropriate motivation.

It may be that poor and minority children develop some special intellectual strengths as a result of adaptation to a distinctive environment. Unfortunately, there is little research which pursues this point of view. However, there is such strong evidence of creative powers within this population that Torrance can say, "in the future we shall have to depend upon creatively gifted members of disadvantaged and minority cultures for most of our creative achievements" (Fall, 1978, p. 295).

G.S. Hall spoke to the issues surrounding adolescent education in 1904 (Vol 1, p. 47).

Young children grow despite great hardships but later adolescence is more dependent upon favoring conditions of the environment, disturbance of which more readily cause arrest and prevent maturity/ No age is so responsive to all the best and wisest adult behaviors.

Unfortunately many of the experiences of the gifted Black adolescent have conspired to 'cause arrest and prevent maturity ' Since they readily sense the inferiority of much of their education and since they see that many who have succeeded in school are still excluded from the social and economic rewards, they often reduce their efforts to the level of rewards expected. This adaptation reduces the

pain of working as hard or harder than whites for fewer rewards. It also provides excuses for the uneven allocation of resources since it can be argued by the decision makers that Black adolescents cannot learn. It also follows that most projects designed to develop potential giftedness have been quickly dismantled or gutted.

A society which designates schooling as the basis for developing the various competencies needed by the society, which purports to afford equal developmental opportunities and special developmental efforts to identify and develop gifts and talents, must be prodded and forced, if necessary, to heed the admonition of Thomas Jefferson--

The object (of education) is to bring into action that mass of talents which lies buried in poverty ... for want of means of development.

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